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ABSTRACT

Adaptive skills are the perceptual, emotional, and behavioral tendencies that are learned at a young age. They can be a major block to competence by affecting one's functioning at the two higher skill levels of functional and work content skills. Because students and faculty relate to each other as members of a family, they can help each other learn about their adaptive skills. Some areas in educational programs for which this holds implications are: (1) the community of learners; (2) experiential learning; (3) program feedback; (4) faculty composition; (5) faculty/student ratio; (6) self-assessment; and (7) individual therapy. An instrument for assessing adaptive skills, the Adaptive Skills Checklist, has been developed. An address is provided for further information or a copy of the instrument. (DC)

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EDUCATING FOR ADAPTIVE SKILLS

by Ronald Short

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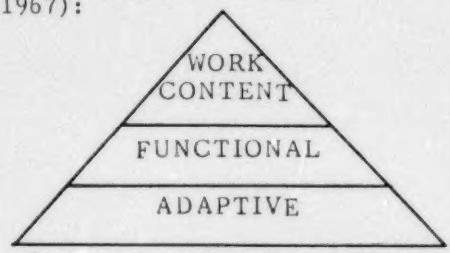
EDUCATING FOR ADAPTIVE SKILLS

Work Content, Functional and Adaptive Skills Consider the taxonomy of skills developed by Sidney Fine (1967):



The top of the pyramid, *work content*, pertains to those skills that are applicable to a particular job. The second level, *functional skills*, refers to skills which transfer from job to job and to different contexts. They include such things as interpersonal communication, designing and diagnosing; and they apply in a wide variety of circumstances. The final level, or *adaptive skills*, addresses the predispositions that we learned when very young. They become a part of us, the perceptual, emotional and behavioral tendencies that we carry with us into all parts of our lives.

At times these early learnings can become a major block to our competence. It is as though they lie underground, as if asleep, until we are placed in stressful contexts that are similar to those experienced earlier in life. They then can awaken, sometimes with a vengeance, appear as if from nowhere, play "gotcha" with our emotions, shake our abilities at the two higher skills levels and create considerable emotional impact. The practitioner who is unaware of this is left in turmoil and self-doubt.

Educational Programs as Family If you have ever wanted to say to a student when inappropriately challenged, "Hey, look, I'm not your Dad!", what follows should provide an interesting perspective. Our academic programs provide an opportunity to learn about our early adaptive experiences and skills. In our graduate program, students become members of an intentional learning community. The community becomes, at some level, "family." I suspect this is true of most academic programs that have a community.

To illustrate, we ask a consultant to help us deal with and learn about authority. The consultant asks the students to identify people on the faculty who remind them of an important authority figure from the past. The students then report their associations. The results always astound me. I have been both "good and bad Dad," "older brother who always got the goodies," a "Sister of Providence" in a parochial school, a "policeman" and a "wise, old minister who has all the answers to any question that can be asked." Other faculty experience the same, although we have some who seem to be "lightning rods," attracting more than their share of projections.

Parenthetically, because of my own adaptive skills, it has taken me nine years as a "student" in our experience-based graduate program to realize that one of my major roles is to be a "good dad," providing corrective experiences for those who decide that I am significant to their lives. I also have taken an inordinate amount of time learning that the 45-year-old student sitting in front of me can actually be experiencing me through a 12-year-old's glasses. I now understand my loneliness as faculty and director. *I am like a piece of flypaper attracting and collecting images of what students need me to be.* My behavior, although experienced as congruent from my

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side, is interpreted through those many images. Like the well-traveled motor home, the faculty become pasted with stickers from all over the world to the point that the driver can wonder, "Who and where am I now?" For the students, learning about the projected stickers and how they affect their own sense of internal authority can be among the most important learnings of school. Perhaps most important, the student learns how to learn about him/herself; a critical skill for the future. Our educational programs are windows that link our past with our future. Education can provide a context of learning how early experiences affect behavior now.

Some Implications for Educational Programs with the "Inward" Look "On-the-job training" in functional and adaptive skills places different requirements on our educational programs. The following come to mind:

1. Community of Learners, or "You can't learn about yourself with a parade of strangers."
2. Experiential, laboratory learning, or "You can't learn to do something by just reading about how to do it."
3. Program Norms, or "You can't learn unless you get feedback you can trust."
4. Faculty, or "You need good moms and dads." Both sexes need to be powerfully represented with a clear sense of their personal as well as academic authority. Primarily faculty should be able to both see and act on immediate experience, capturing the moments that illuminate important learnings.
5. Faculty/student ratio. Learning from feedback from someone who is saying, "No, that is wrong," requires a high quality relationship. For this and other reasons, the optimal faculty/student ratio should be relatively low.
6. Self-assessment and evaluation, or "You can't learn unless you take responsibility for learning about yourself." Students want to assess their own skills, not just to please the faculty, but to participate in creating their own competence. Some form of self-assessment seems essential for programs that want to focus on functional and adaptive skills. Moments of accountability, like oral examinations, also offer some of the most significant learnings about adaptive skills.
7. Therapy, or "You need help when you step on an adaptive skill 'landmine'."

Tool: The Adaptive Skills Checklist An academic program that wants to learn about adaptive skills needs some tools. A few years ago our faculty had serious concerns about what we were doing. We carefully defined the competencies necessary for graduation. Yet, we asked two students to drop the program for other, vague reasons and we graduated two others, wishing we hadn't. In both cases, it was difficult to specify why. We decided to try to find out. We began to investigate what was real, not what should be real. We asked questions like: "What is it that we are really measuring?" A consultant interviewed each faculty member independently about what he or she, in fact, was judging and evaluating.

The result was an instrument called the Adaptive Skills Checklist and an accompanying booklet that presented the staff's behavioral indicators of the skills. The dimensions that represent high agreement among all five faculty were Dealing With Authority (both Appropriate and Inappropriate Dependence, and Appropriate and Inappropriate Independence), the Capacity for Self-Correction, Helping Others to be Self-Correcting, the Availability of Affect, Adapting to Fluctuations in Self-Esteem, the Awareness of One's Impact on Others, Congruence and Naturalness, and a Balance between Participant and Observer Roles.

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For further information or a copy of the instrument, write the author at Whitworth College, Spokane, WA 99251.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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